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SUBJECT: TURKEY'S EU CANDIDACY ADRIFT

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Classified By: Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (C) Summary: Ankara-based European diplomats confirm our assessment that Turkey's EU candidacy remains adrift more than two months after the EU decided at the December Summit to set a date for accession negotiations. PM Erdogan has yet to name a lead EU negotiator, and since the Summit has traveled extensively to countries outside the EU. The EU, meanwhile, has postponed two upcoming reports related to Turkey's accession to avoid any significant action prior to the French referendum on the EU Constitution. EU contacts in Ankara say Turkey's "screening" process will begin in October, the official start of negotiations, despite GOT arguments that screening should begin sooner. European diplomats expect accession negotiations to begin on schedule, but say the GOT's aggressive approach to the Summit indicates the road ahead will be rough. A Turkish MFA contact asserted that the EU will have to adopt a more supportive approach if the negotiations are to succeed. End Summary.

EU Diplomats See Lost Momentum

2. (C) Ankara-based European diplomats note to us that more than two months after the Summit, the GOT has yet to name a lead EU negotiator or to organize the state bureaucracy in preparation to begin the process of adopting the 80,000-page EU aquis. Ambassador Kretschmer, head of the European Commission Representation to Turkey, expressed concern in the February 27 Turkish press that the GOT has made no progress on EU accession since the Summit. Following the Summit success, our diplomatic contacts point out, PM Erdogan has been traveling extensively -- but generally not to EU states. Instead, he has visited South Asia, Russia, Albania, and Bosnia, and leaves for Africa March 1. Our Eurocontacts claim they remain confident that the next phase of the accession process will begin as planned, but, as Stephen McCormick of the UK Embassy put it, "Momentum has been lost. I hope (Erdogan) hasn't lost interest in the EU."

3. (U) The EU, for its part, has also delayed a number of items on the accession agenda. The European Commission has rebuffed GOT efforts to begin the "screening" process before October 3, the official start of the accession talks. The Commission has also postponed the scheduled release dates for the Framework for Negotiations, a document that will spell out in detail how the negotiations will be conducted, and the Accession Partnership Agreement, which will provide general guidance for steps Turkey must take to make further progress toward the Copenhagen Criteria for human rights and democracy. Moreover, Enlargement Commissioner Rehn has repeatedly pushed back his planned visit to Turkey, now set for March. Contacts say these delays were caused largely by French insistence that the Commission take no significant action on Turkey until after the planned French resolution on the EU constitution.

"Screening" to Start In October

4. (C) Screening is a process under which the European Commission and the applicant state compare national legislation with EU requirements for all 35 aquis chapters. The two sides identify areas to be addressed during accession talks, and separate "easy" chapters, requiring relatively less work to bring national legislation into EU conformity, from "hard" ones. GOT officials initially maintained after the Summit that screening should begin immediately and be completed before October, arguing that Turkey has already been working with the Commission on elements of the aquis and, as a long-standing Customs Union member, already met EU standards in a number of areas.

5. (C) At one point, Commissioner Rehn stated publicly that screening for Turkey would begin this summer. However, Martin Dawson, head of the Political Section at the European Commission's Representation to Turkey, told us the French

Government strongly opposed the idea, causing the Commission to abandon it. Dawson said the Commission has made clear to the GOT that it considers screening to be the first phase of the accession negotiations, not a separate, preparatory activity. The EU in December made a political decision to start in October, and the Commission cannot take action before that date. Dawson said the EU is not treating Turkey differently from past candidates -- although some applicant states began screening in advance of the official start of accession negotiations, most did not. Contacts at the Turkish MFA say they accept the Commission's position, though they are not entirely happy with it.

"Framework" Will Spell Out Process

16. (C) The Commission has not officially determined whether the EU and GOT must complete screening for all 35 aquis chapters before the next phase of negotiations can begin. Dawson said the Commission will most likely break the chapters into blocks of 2-4, beginning accession negotiations on an individual block after the block has been screened, while simultaneously continuing to screen remaining blocks. McCormick also expected the Commission to take this approach, and said the UK will object if a slower process is proposed. Past practice is a poor guide -- the Commission has used a variety of approaches with previous candidates. The issue should be clarified in the Framework for Negotiations, which the Commission expects to introduce in June. McCormick said it could take until September, just before the start of talks, for member states to approve the document.

EU, GOT Foresee Bumpy Road Ahead

17. (C) Both Turkish and European contacts say they are still feeling the effects of the bruising Summit negotiations, and they predict the road ahead will be bumpy. Willemijn Van Haften, political officer at the Dutch Embassy, said the Turkish approach to the Summit violated EU traditions of consensus and compromise. She said EU officials were irritated with the way the GOT haggled over the draft Summit conclusions, something candidate states are technically not permitted to do. "No one else has ever even thought of trying that," she said. "They have no idea how much ill will they created." What's worse, she said, is that the EU yielded to the GOT on some points, virtually ensuring that the EU will face similar tactics in the future. McCormick said not all EU states were as upset by the GOT's tactics as the Dutch, who bore the brunt of the pressure as term president. But he acknowledged that Erdogan's "blunt" style clashes with EU decorum. Thomas Bagger, political and press counselor at the German Embassy, said that even the members of the pro-Turkey German delegation at the Summit "will be happy not to see the Turks again for a while." The European diplomats agreed the GOT will run into a brick wall if it tries to haggle with the Commission over the aquis. The aquis, they say, leaves minimal room for flexibility on the EU side, and Commission bureaucrats, unlike heads of state, will not hesitate to say "no" to the Turks, even if the GOT threatens to walk away from the talks.

MFA Official Calls for New EU Attitude on Turkey

18. (C) Ali Kemal Aydin, department head at the MFA Deputy Directorate General for EU Affairs, made it clear that he believes success in the accession process will require a "change in attitude" on the EU side no less than on the Turkish side. Aydin noted that France is changing its Constitution to require a national referendum on future EU member states -- an amendment specifically aimed at Turkey. If other member states follow suit, "Turks might tell the EU to go to hell," he said. Aydin averred that Turkey is being treated with more skepticism than other candidates. The EU actively helped previous applicants, such as the Baltic states, to meet the criteria. But when it comes to Turkey, the EU is constantly dragging its feet and criticizing. Aydin said the GOT is irritated with the EU states for doing nothing to change the behavior of Cyprus, which has consistently pressured Turkey to recognize the ROC and vetoed EU trade and assistance proposals aimed at the TRNC. Noting that the EU had no trouble sanctioning Austria when Joerg Haidar's controversial right-wing party entered the government, he averred that the EU states refuse to take a similar stand against Cyprus because they are secretly pleased to see Cyprus provoking Turkey. "At this point, they should treat us as part of the family," he said. "I don't think they will."

UK Contact Remains Optimistic

9. (C) McCormick acknowledged there is some truth to such GOT views. Turkey inspires less enthusiasm, and more anxiety, among EU members than any previous candidate. Moreover, the EU, learning from past mistakes, has toughened its approach to enlargement. While in the past the EU accepted a stated commitment from applicant states to implement the required legal reforms, from now on it will require evidence of implementation. Still, he claims to be optimistic. The path to accession for Turkey will be rough, but the journey will change Turkey. In the end, he predicted, Turkey will become more European, and Europe will get used to the idea.

Comment

10. (C) After coming to power in November 2002, the ruling AK Party (AKP) tightly focused its agenda on the short-term effort to earn a date for EU accession talks, generally keeping a lid on other issues. Since the December Summit, the party has been struggling to gain a new foothold. Erdogan has engaged in confusing, unfocused foreign policy efforts, and at the Davos World Economic Forum he clumsily raised the controversial headscarf issue, which he had been cautiously avoiding prior to the Summit (reftel). His failure to name a lead EU negotiator is part of a larger inability to carry out a widely anticipated cabinet re-shuffle.

11. (C) The long, bureaucratic process of EU accession will require a much different GOT approach than the highly political campaign for a negotiation date. Accession will take at least 10 years, far longer than the AKP leadership can postpone the emergence of issues like headscarves that are important to the party's base. These issues will pit the AKP against the secular establishment, in a clash that could make European observers nervous. The success of the next phase of EU succession will depend on AKP's ability to adjust to these new realities and to handle the nuts and bolts of harmonization efficiently. In this latter regard, we are concerned by the recent retirement of Saadet Arikan, the Justice Ministry DG for legal harmonization and one of the very few Turkish bureaucrats with a realistic sense of what the EU and EU accession mean. In our past two meetings with her she had expressed concern at the low quality and Islamist perspective of people being installed by the AKP government in her Ministry.

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